

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

**SCIENCE FICTION AS A PRISM FOR UNDERSTANDING
GEOPOLITICS**

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF OPERATIONAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 2015

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Abstract

This paper argues that because science fiction accurately reflects the characteristics of the geopolitical era in which it is written, it can offer insights into the nature of our contemporary geopolitical era. For roughly the first 80 years (1890 - 1970) of its existence as a recognizable genre, English-language science fiction exhibited a left-of-center political viewpoint. During the first half of this period, the writings of H. G. Wells and Jack London manifested the evolutionary and racial aspects, respectively, of John Agnew's Naturalized Age of geopolitics (1875 – 1945). Later, Isaac Asimov's classic *The Foundation Trilogy* reflected an emphasis on central planning and vanguard leadership characteristic of the Ideological Age of geopolitics (1945 - 1990). Starting in the 1970s, the rise of military science fiction, exemplified by Jerry E. Pournelle, signaled a turn to more traditional themes and values that harken back to the Civilizational Age of geopolitics (1815 – 1875). This paper demonstrates that contemporary science fiction represents a right-wing, post-Ideological orientation that lacks the ambitious utopianism of its left-wing antecedents. In view of the fact that science fiction has accurately reflected the geopolitical era in which it is embedded in the past, this paper concludes by arguing that the current era of geopolitics may eventually become known as the "Neo-Civilizational Age."

Introduction

For roughly the first 80 years (1890-1970) of its existence as a recognizable genre, English-language science fiction manifested a left-of-center political viewpoint.¹ In this paper I will argue that during this period, science fiction also reflected the tenets of two of John Agnew's three ages of geopolitics: the Naturalized Age (1875 – 1945) and the Ideological Age (1945-1990).² Starting around 1970, and becoming especially pronounced in the 1980s, the predominant political orientation of science fiction shifted to the right. I will further posit that this thematic change in science fiction can be used to analyze the transition of geopolitics to a post-Ideological age. I contend that because science fiction as a genre has historically provided an accurate reflection of the characteristics of the geopolitical age in which it is embedded, it can therefore offer valuable insights into the nature of our contemporary era. I intend to show that the rightward shift in science fiction is indicative of a narrowing of the conceptual horizons of Western culture from the outward-directed Naturalized and Ideological Ages to more limited, inward-directed traditional visions and storylines that most closely align with Agnew's Civilizational Age of geopolitics (1815 - 1875).³

Science fiction can serve as a remarkably insightful prism through which to analyze geopolitical trends. Unlike a lens, a prism separates light and permits identification and analysis of its component parts. Science fiction can perform a similar function for geopolitics. For example, it has been argued that the leftist tilt of the 1890-1970 period reflected the “supposed triumph of mass organization and technology that captivated H. G. Wells’ readers, and inspired Stalin, Hitler, Mao.”⁴ Science fiction can therefore help us break down, identify, and better understand the geopolitical traits of the era in which it is being written.

The first section of this paper will briefly review Karl Marx's concept of the future state of human freedom, in order to illustrate the socialist-leftist influence on science fiction. Section two will examine a key work of H. G. Wells that describes the socialist future and also aligns with the evolutionary element of Naturalized geopolitics. The next section concerns several early works of the American socialist Jack London that exemplify the racial-biological strain of the Naturalized Age. Section four demonstrates how Isaac Asimov's classic *The Foundation Trilogy* shows the unmistakable signs of the Ideological Age with its leftist emphasis on central planning and leadership by a cadre of experts. Throughout the leftist era, science fiction employed futuristic, ambitious themes that were outward-oriented and forward-looking. Section five focuses on the rightward shift of science fiction, exemplified by Jerry E. Pournelle, characterized by an inward-looking focus on individual heroes, military settings, and future societies that actually recall past eras. The most popular science fiction since approximately 1980 is therefore reflective of characteristics that hearken back to the Civilizational Age, distinguished by multi-polarity, neo-liberal economics, and hierarchical societies. The concluding arguments will discuss how while this new thematic orientation and "Neo-Civilizational" geopolitical age will still be capable of producing good science fiction, it will nevertheless seem less expansive and imaginative than the works of earlier eras because the Neo-Civilizational age lacks the ambitious utopianism of its predecessors.

I.

I will first examine how leftist science fiction shared with socialism a positive view of the future similar to Marx's vision of human freedom.⁵ This point is deserving of some discussion because although Marxism is well-known to promise an end state of earthly paradise, one will search the corpus of Marx's works in vain for detailed futurological images. One of the few

occasions where Marx does discuss this issue in detail occurs in *Capital, Volume III*. This passage is worth examining at some length, both as a reflection of Marx's own views on the socialistic future, and as a link to the leftist bias of the first generation of science fiction writers:

Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants ... so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with the realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.⁶

This passage sketches Marx's vision of humankind's forward evolution toward socialism: as human needs and expectations continually increase, so will the means of production advance, leading eventually to a state of socialized prosperity sufficient to create an outward-expanding realm of freedom and security. A mandatory characteristic of this realm of freedom is a shortened working day. Although Marx presents no word-pictures of the realm of freedom, no visions of futuristic cities, his work is connected to early science fiction by its focus on a rationalist, materialist social advancement and mastery of nature that will open up a new and expansive future for the human race. Human (specifically, European) mastery of nature through an evolutionary process was also a key tenet of Naturalized geopolitics.⁷ We will now see how these leftist themes appeared and were fleshed out in the writings of one of the founders of science fiction, H. G. Wells.

II.

Herbert George (H. G.) Wells (1866 – 1946) was born in Bromley, Kent, into a family described as “the lowest level of the middle class.”⁸ Wells found avenues to self-improvement through the paths of education and dedication to socialism.⁹ He acknowledged the importance of socialism to his intellectual outlook in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), devoting a whole section of a chapter on his university days to his discovery of the concept and the start of his association with the moderate socialist Fabian Society, as well as a final chapter entitled “The Idea of a Planned World,” occupying approximately one-fifth of the entire volume.¹⁰ This paper will concentrate on a novel that has taken its place in the second tier of Wells’ catalogue, *In the Days of the Comet* (1906). This work develops Wells’ socialist politics to their most fully realized level, containing a brief but arresting description of a socialist utopia that looks much like the New Jerusalem of the Christian Bible. Wells also used this book as an opportunity to express one his recurring themes, that humanity was progressively advancing toward higher forms of society, a view that harmonized well with the Naturalized Age’s emphasis on evolution.

In the Days of the Comet is based on a storyline involving a large, green-hued comet that makes a close approach to the Earth. Earth passes through its tail, which triggers a reaction in the atmosphere, causing unconsciousness in humans and a profound, universal change in brain chemistry. The effect of the comet’s greenish vapors is seen through the eyes of the viewpoint character, a young man named Leadford, who bears a strong resemblance to the young Wells himself. Leadford is from a financially strapped background, socialist in his political views, and of an emotional, romantic temperament, especially towards the object of his affection, a young woman named Nettie. Wells uses the relationship between Leadford, Nettie, and a third character, the upper-class Verrall, to expound on his progressive attitude toward (hetero) sexual

relations. Additional dramatic tension is added to the narrative in the form of an international crisis: Britain and Germany are about to come to blows in a major war on the night of the Earth's encounter with the comet.¹¹

The chain reaction in the Earth's atmosphere caused by the comet serves as the catalyst for a worldwide socialist transformation. Upon awakening from the trance induced by the comet, Leadford and the rest of humanity find that they have lost any inclination towards violence, selfishness, or unethical acts. The war between Britain and Germany is immediately called off. Around the world (or at least, initially, the British Empire), governments embark on major programs of economic and social reform; progressive policies which would have been vociferously opposed in the olden days are now implemented without protest as logical and obvious.¹² Articles from the past judged to be wasteful are consigned to the flames in a large revival of the pagan springtime ceremony of Beltane, and the renewed world enters a golden age that is presented as an artistically fleshed-out vision of Marx's realm of freedom.¹³

It is in describing the future society that Wells truly shows the ability of Naturalized Age science fiction to handle grand futuristic themes. *In the Days of the Comet* is told using an "envelope" narrative structure: it opens and closes with an unnamed narrator encountering an elderly Leadford, writing an account of "the Change" wrought by the comet. As the book closes, Leadford invites his visitor to contrast the pre-comet Earth with the utopia visible from his window:

He put out his hand, and quite noiselessly the great window widened down to us, and the splendid nearer prospect of that dreamland city was before me. There for one clear moment I saw it; its galleries and open spaces, its trees of golden fruit and crystal waters, its music and rejoicing, love and beauty without ceasing flowing through its varied and intricate streets. And the nearer people I saw now directly and plainly, and no longer in the distorted mirror that hung overhead. They really did not justify my suspicions, and yet - ! They were such

people as one sees on earth – save that they were changed ... [t]hey were exalted.¹⁴

Wells' language here not only shows the intimate connection of early science fiction with leftist futurology, but also illustrates a connection that both have to Christian eschatology. Consider the similarity of Wells' vision to that of a much earlier futurist, John of Patmos:

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven ... [a]nd the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb *is* the light thereof ... And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither *whatsoever* worketh abomination, or *maketh* a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life. And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and either side of the river, *was there* the tree of life, which bare twelve *manner* of fruits, *and* yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations.¹⁵

We therefore see a new dimension of literary greatness in H. G. Wells, not only as a writer of science fiction looking outward at cosmic phenomena like comets, but also as a great synthesizer, linking together long-standing Christian themes, Marx's projections of the socialistic future, and major concepts of Naturalized geopolitics such as mastery of the natural world and social evolution. But although Wells is universally known as a founder of science fiction, the United States produced a contemporary writer of equal brilliance, and almost Wells' peer in terms of literary imagination: John Griffith "Jack" London, to whom I next turn.

III.

Jack London was younger than H. G. Wells by a mere decade, born on 12 January 1876 in San Francisco. Although he traveled internationally, London remained ultimately tied to California, meeting his unfortunately early death there on 22 November 1916. Geography may have played a role in shaping London's world outlook: in his day (as now) California was seen as a forward-looking frontier state of new possibilities. London was also shaped by his class

background, which differed from Wells'. While Wells was middle-class throughout his life (albeit very tenuously in his youth), London received a harsh working-class upbringing, and retained his blue-collar bearing and manner of dress even after becoming a successful and wealthy author.¹⁶ The development of London's politics and world-view were completed by his adoption of socialism, social Darwinism, and a form of "naturalism," (not to be considered as synonymous with Agnew's Naturalized Age geopolitics) an influential philosophical school of his day that interpreted concepts such as Nietzsche's "blond beast" for popular consumption.¹⁷ References to Nietzsche appear with regularity in London's works, sometimes critically (see *The Sea Wolf*, 1904) other times admiringly (see *The Iron Heel*, below). While socialism and even social Darwinism may have held obvious attraction for a person of London's background, his inclusion of Nietzsche in his personal pantheon injected a more right-wing element into one of his most political novels. As we shall see, this work, *The Iron Heel*, also demonstrated a strain of racial-biological white supremacy that was an essential tenet of Naturalized geopolitics.¹⁸

The Iron Heel was published in 1908, and like *In the Days of the Comet* also contains glimpses of a socialist utopia. Again paralleling *Comet*, *The Iron Heel* is written in an envelope narrative format. The main character is the American socialist super-leader Ernest Everhard, described glowingly as "... a superman, a blond beast such as Nietzsche has described, and in addition he was aflame with democracy."¹⁹ His name suggests (none too subtly) both Scandinavian roots and perpetual male virility. Everhard's story, a tale of heroic armed resistance against the Iron Heel, a proto-fascist capitalist oligarchy, is told in the form of a memoir penned by his wife Avis. Avis Everhard's account of the revolutionary years of 1912-1932 is lost for seven centuries, and is rediscovered by the inhabitants of a future socialist commonwealth styled as "the Brotherhood of Man."²⁰ The "outer envelope" of the story is

provided in the form a critical analysis of the Everhard Manuscript by a citizen of the Brotherhood, one Anthony Meredith, a man of evident education and intellect, although no specifics about him are offered. London uses Meredith's commentary, incorporated into *The Iron Heel* in the form of extensive footnotes, to critique capitalist society and economics from the viewpoint of an enlightened outsider, looking backward from approximately the year A.D. 2600.

London's future vision is thus reflective of a left-wing viewpoint, but with a nuance that appears unusual and unsettling to Twenty-First Century readers: his utopia has some key features in common with later fascist concepts of the racial superiority of people descended from Nordic stock. As a key example, Ernest Everhard is literally presented as the embodiment of a Nietzschean "blond beast," in terms of his striking physical presence, will-to-power personality, and his rejection of conventional bourgeois morality.²¹ The far-future perfected world inhabited by Meredith is not described in detail; but clues to its nature may be gleaned from the names of two of its chief cities: "Asgard" and "Ardis," both suggestive of a lofty, remote, Viking magnificence. Additional details may also be extracted from two of London's short stories, "A Curious Fragment," and "Goliah," like *The Iron Heel* also published in 1908 and set in approximately the same narrative universe. "A Curious Fragment" also includes commentary on a capitalist oligarchy identical to the Iron Heel, but here the future editor is writing in c. A.D. 4600, implying a stable, enlightened society that has outgrown the need for revolutions.²² "Goliah" tells the story of a benevolent "German-American" scientist who uses advanced technology to bring peace and reason to a troubled world; the crew of his ship, the fantastically-named *Energion*, are approvingly described as "fair-haired, blue-eyed Swedes, Norwegians ... stolid Russian Finns."²³ "Goliah" also references "the wonder city of Asgard," the site of a

gigantic monument to Goliath “that dwarfs the pyramids.”²⁴ The reader is left with is an uneasy feeling of anticipation of the Aryan mysticism and overwhelming architecture of National Socialism. It is not remarkable then, that even such an admirer of London as George Orwell would write, in speculating on what political direction London might have taken had he survived into old age, that “one can imagine him falling a victim to Nazi racial theory.”²⁵

It should be noted emphatically at this juncture that no anti-Semitic element is evident in the works of London discussed here. In spite of the overlap between London’s views on “Nordics” and those later espoused by Hitler, London was no proto-fascist. It is most accurate to describe London as reflecting the deep-seated racial attitudes of Western civilization in his time, which were later adopted and grotesquely exaggerated by Nazism, rather than ascribing prescient Nazi sympathies to him. A passage from Wells’ *Experiment in Autobiography*, written in 1932, succinctly sums up the general assumptions about race that would have been absorbed by any Western youth receiving a basic education in the late Nineteenth Century (roughly the first third of the Naturalized Age):

It was made a matter of general congratulation about me that I was English ... my mind had leapt all too readily to the idea that I was a blond and blue-eyed Nordic, quite the best make of human being known. England was consciously Teutonic in those days ...

In those days I had ideas about Aryans extraordinarily like Mr. Hitler’s. The more I hear of him the more I am convinced that his mind is almost the twin of my thirteen year old mind in 1879; but heard through a megaphone and – implemented ... but unlike Hitler I had no feelings about the contemporary Jew. Quite a number of boarders in the Bromley Academy were Jewish and I was not aware of it.²⁶

Wells here gives voice to a whole generation on both sides of the Atlantic, and I contend that if the English-specific expressions in this passage were to be replaced with Americanisms, one would have an accurate description London’s racial views as well. The goal of this analysis

is to demonstrate that although some of London's most powerful literary visions of future society included images that would be incorporated by right-wing extremists three decades later, he was nonetheless a man of his time, and therefore of the left. And in common with other leftist science fiction authors of the period, London demonstrated an ability to look forward and outward on a grand scale, including the use of literary motifs such as interstellar travel and contact with alien civilizations.

The last work by London that I will examine represents a portion of his terminal literary output, and is arguably his most enigmatic tale of all: the short story "The Red One," published posthumously in 1918. The plot is straightforward but profound: a traveler from England of scientific background named Bassett is stranded on Guadalcanal. Bassett lives with a local tribe, eventually discovering that the natives' god, known as "the Red One" or "the Star-Born," is no totem or idol, but rather a gigantic red sphere, evidently of extraterrestrial origin and intelligent construction. Bassett, dying of tropical disease, experiences an agony of frustration that he will be unable to carry news of this great discovery back to civilization.²⁷ Bassett's contemplations, in his lucid intervals, afford London an opportunity to ruminate on socialism and evolution. The following passage, which well displays the "outward gaze" of leftist science fiction, can also be considered as London's "last testament" on his own personal philosophy:

Who were they, what were they, those far distant and superior ones who had bridged the sky with their gigantic, red-iridescent, heaven-singing message? Surely, and long since, had they, too, trod the path on which man had so recently, by the calendar of the cosmos, set his feet ... And what were they on their heights? Had they won Brotherhood? Or had they learned that the law of love imposed the penalty of weakness and decay? Was strife, life? Was the rule of all the universe the pitiless rule of natural selection? ... Of one thing he was certain: No drop of red dew shaken from the lion-maned of some sun in torment, was the sounding sphere. It was of design, not chance, and it contained the speech and wisdom of the stars.²⁸

The common thread running through both Wells' and London's writing is an outward-directed, forward-looking left wing self-confidence: humanity's problems are comprehensible and manageable, even on a worldwide scale, and solvable through progressive socialist politics. A belief in evolutionary progress is clearly evident in the works discussed here, in spite of London's tinge of skepticism seen in the passage above (which, it should be remembered, was written during the carnage of World War I). London's and Wells' racial views are reflective of basic assumptions of the Naturalized Age of geopolitics, and do not contradict their position on the political left. For both men, even though they functioned within the prejudices of their time, socialism formed a basic building block of the foundations of early science fiction, so fundamental to the genre that its influence would be passed along to also inform a key work of the Ideological Age of geopolitics, one which has gained recognition as one of science fiction's supreme masterpieces: *The Foundation Trilogy* of Isaac Asimov.

IV.

Isaac Asimov (1920 – 1992) was born in Petrovichi, Russia. He records that his only memory of life in the Soviet republic came from age two, the experience of handling a book and feeling strongly attracted to it.²⁹ Asimov therefore showed an early inclination toward scholarship, which would eventually grow into his livelihood. His family emigrated to the United States in 1923, arriving in New York City.³⁰ He lived most of his life in New York, and the image of an advanced, urbanized environment would be highly influential in his writings; the city's progressive politics also left an indelible mark on him. He was an academic chemist by trade (Ph.D., Columbia, 1948).³¹ But it was as a science fiction author in the Ideological Age of geopolitics that Asimov made his reputation. According to Agnew, "[b]y definition the modern geopolitical imagination is ideological, if ideology is defined as ... 'political ideas in action.'"³²

As arguably the most influential science fiction writer of the Ideological Age, Asimov set the orientation for the entire genre, and he gave it a pronounced and action-oriented tilt toward the political left.

While Asimov cannot be classified as a formal socialist, his politics throughout his lifetime were consistently left of center. This was reflected in Asimov's Great Depression adolescence of near-poverty spent working in his father's candy stores, followed by association with a New York City-based consciously anti-Fascist club of science fiction fans and writers called the Futurians, a lifelong adherence to atheism, and membership and leadership in the American Humanist Association, an organization whose advocacy of secularism necessarily places it at odds with many branches of American conservatism.³³ I will here concentrate on how Asimov's leftism appeared in *The Foundation Trilogy*.³⁴

The core theme of *The Foundation Trilogy* is the decline, fall, and eventual renaissance of a far-future Galactic Empire. Asimov openly credited Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as the kernel of his idea.³⁵ However, he introduced a new element to the familiar story in the agency through which Galactic civilization is revived: the "Foundations," a pair of colonies of scientists assigned the mission of minimizing the coming dark ages and speeding the founding of a new Empire.³⁶ The trilogy has an epic scope similar to Gibbon's classic. The Imperial capital, a world near the galactic center known as Trantor, is girdled by a gigantic megalopolis that covers the entire land surface of the planet.³⁷ The allusion to both Ancient Rome and Asimov's adopted home town of New York City is obvious. Asimov further maintains the reader's interest by inserting unanticipated plot devices, such as the enigmatic character known as the Mule, who nearly derails the Foundations with his Hitleresque ability to control the minds of others (thankfully, the Mule, while driven and power-hungry, is also of

mild-mannered personality).³⁸ However, Asimov departs most sharply from Gibbon, and moves most noticeably to the left, when he explains the process through which a new and better Galactic Empire will be built: not through blind chance and the random actions of individuals, but through planning, embodied in the “science of psychohistory,” and the direction of the masses by a committed cadre of agents, the members of the secretive, vanguard “Second Foundation.”³⁹

Psychohistory is the creation of the brilliant Hari Seldon, and represents an accurate means of forecasting the future actions of large masses: “[t]he reaction of one man could be forecast by no known mathematics; the reaction of a billion is something else again.”⁴⁰

Psychohistory is boldly presented as a kind of futuristic dialectical materialism: “Hari Seldon plotted the social and economic trends of the time, sighted along the curves and foresaw the continuing and accelerating fall of civilization and the gap of thirty thousand years that must elapse before a struggling new Empire could emerge from the ruins.”⁴¹ The mission of the Foundations is to speed up the dialectic, and shorten the interregnum to a single thousand years.⁴² In intent and operational strategy, the Foundations parallel Lenin’s idea of a vanguard party driving the masses forward to revolutionary consciousness.⁴³ The vanguard nature of the secret Second Foundation, the guardian of the plan for a new Empire, is explained by Asimov in the following terms:

“... a large minority of human beings are mentally equipped to take part in the advance of physical science [the First Foundation’s specialty], and all receive the crude and visible benefits thereof. Only an insignificant minority, however, are inherently able to lead Man through the greater involvements of Mental Science [the Second Foundation’s area of expertise]; and the benefits derived therefrom, while longer lasting, are more subtle and less apparent. Furthermore, since such an orientation would lead to the development of a benevolent dictatorship of the mentally best – virtually a higher subdivision of Man – it would be resented and could not be stable without the application of a force which would depress the rest

of Mankind to brute level. Such a development is repugnant to us and must be avoided.”⁴⁴

Thus, the Second Foundation must remain clandestine until such time as the Galaxy has matured enough to accept its enlightened leadership.⁴⁵

There is at the very least an echo of Leninist vanguard theory in the *Foundation* books. Asimov's autobiographies contain no reference to any direct connection with socialist activism. However, no such connection is necessary to place Asimov's writings on the left of the political spectrum. At the time *The Foundation Trilogy* was written, the early 1950s, America was dominated by the ideology of the post-World War II liberal consensus, which included a faith in centrally-planned problem solving by trained elites as a basic component.⁴⁶ Asimov was inclined by his life experience to be politically left wing, but *The Foundation Trilogy* also reflected the broad consensus of the Ideological Age of geopolitics, in which the competing systems of post-war capitalism and communism were both outward-directed, in that they both actively sought to expand their spheres of influence, and forward-looking toward a better future. Indeed, post-war liberal capitalism very much looked forward to the possibility of a *de facto* classless America, achieved not through Marxist dogma but sheer productive abundance.⁴⁷ The Ideological Age, like its predecessors, was in impermanent artifact of a rapidly transforming world. When it ended, science fiction would once again bear witness to the signs of a new geopolitical age, one whose world-view, in contrast to the Naturalized and Ideological periods, would be marked by an inward orientation and more traditionalist characteristics.

V.

The new era of science fiction actually begins roughly two decades in advance of the end of the Cold War, with its first recognizable works appearing in the 1970s. The exemplar of the

trend is the sub-genre of military science fiction, which emerged as a distinct field in the 1980s under the leadership of Baen Books publishing house. By the mid-1980s, Baen's books were featuring a distinctive type of cover art, which although arguably gaudy and "tacky," was nonetheless instantly recognizable, often featuring splendidly uniformed warriors and stirring battle scenes. This represented a significant shift for science fiction, away from futurological vistas and toward a more conservative geopolitical orientation. I will concentrate here on the first, and in my opinion the best, author in the vast military science fiction field, the highly versatile Jerry E. Pournelle, whose book *Falkenberg's Legion* (1990) is one of the foundational texts of the genre.

Jerry Pournelle was born in 1933 in Shreveport, Louisiana. He styles his website, the appropriately named "Chaos Manor," as "the original blog," having been online since 1997.⁴⁸ His site records his education from elementary school in Tennessee to the Ph.D. level, and (strong) opinions on a wide range of topics. Pournelle consistently espouses a rigorously thought out right-wing libertarian viewpoint, perhaps not surprising given the combination of his Southern roots and advanced education. His literary output, from policy doctrine written for the Air Force to journalism for the early computer magazine Byte, is considerable, but he may be most well remembered for effectively founding the military science fiction sub-genre with the creation of its prototype character: mercenary soldier Colonel John Christian Falkenberg.

Falkenberg first appeared in the short novel *The Mercenary* (1977).⁴⁹ Pournelle's stories of Falkenberg's mercenary legion were eventually consolidated into four novels, *Prince of Mercenaries* (1989), *Falkenberg's Legion* (1990), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1991), and *Prince of Sparta* (1993), the last two of which were co-authored with Canadian-American author S. M. Stirling. All four books were in turn published in the omnibus collection *The Prince* (2002).

The Falkenberg stories are set in a future history in which the Cold War has ended with the United States and the Soviet Union formalizing their relationship into a confederation known as the CoDominium.⁵⁰ Humanity masters interstellar flight in the Twenty-First Century, but the “Great Exodus” beginning in 2020 produces a cluster of inhabited worlds that seem feudal rather than futuristic, possibly because the “[f]irst colonists are dissidents, malcontents, and voluntary adventurers;” meanwhile, on Earth the CoDominium experiences increasing stress as “[n]ationalistic revival movements continue;” it is into this milieu that John Christian Falkenberg III is born in 2043.⁵¹

The reader first encounters John Christian Falkenberg as a midshipman at the age of 15, reporting to Florida’s “Canaveral Embarcation [*sic*] Station” for transportation off-world to assume “an appointment to CoDominium Navy Service.”⁵² Cape Canaveral is now under control of the “Bureau of Relocation,” (BuRelock, for short) and the surroundings are anything but futuristic. Canaveral is described as hot, crowded, dirty, and staffed by corrupt governmental officials for whom bribes are an expectation; an atmosphere more Third World than *2001: A Space Odyssey*. After passing through administrative trials, Falkenberg is taken in charge by a CoDominium Lieutenant named Hartmann and two of his men. Hartmann initiates Falkenberg into active-duty service in the time-honored way, with alcohol, and a lesson about the true history of the CoDominium Navy:

“We were created out of the French Foreign Legion,” Hartmann said. “A legion of strangers, to fight for an artificial alliance of nations that hate each other. How can a man give his soul and life to that, Mister Falkenberg? What heart has an alliance? What power to inspire men’s loyalty?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

...

“Ah. But no one knows, for there is no answer. Men cannot die for an alliance. Yet we do fight. And we do die.”

...

The whiskey had taken its effect, and John's head buzzed. He felt sweat break out at his temples and in his armpits, and his stomach rebelled, but he lifted the glass and drank again, in unison with Rolnikov and Bates, and it was more meaningful than the Communion cup had ever been. He tried to ask himself why, but there was only emotion, no thought. He belonged here, with this man, with these men, and he was a man with them.⁵³

This is perhaps the most important passage in the entire series. Pournelle provides the reader with both his thesis and fundamental plot point: traditional values like military bonding are stronger than any alliance or ideology, and the integrity carried in these values can make even a purely mercenary legion an effective fighting force. This is brilliant writing; but it is not science fiction, or at least not such as we have seen in the Naturalized or Ideological Ages. With minor modifications, this excerpt could be inserted into any military coming-of-age story in any past Western historical era; it would not be out of place even in *The Iliad*. Pournelle often reaches back to earlier times for fictional inspiration, and the universe inhabited by Falkenberg often seems to recall Napoleon or even Thucydides.

Falkenberg eventually rises to command a regiment of CoDominium Marines, which is ultimately reconstituted as a purely mercenary unit. Pournelle's future history is too extensive to be examined in depth here, but one of Falkenberg's exploits can be cited as an exemplar of Pournelle's views on power politics, in which the hero must sometimes take draconian measures to prevent the unconscionable from happening. Falkenberg, now a colonel, and his Mercenary Legion are sent to support the government of the colony world of Hadley; in order to prevent mass famine, Falkenberg has no choice but to destroy a rabble-rousing leftist opposition movement. Thirty thousand of the movement's leaders and members are lured into a large stadium and decimated by Falkenberg's riflemen, advancing from the top tier of the stadium into the mob below.⁵⁴ This stunning, riveting scene will be familiar to anyone who has seen the

motion picture *Battleship Potemkin*; but here the reader cheers for Falkenberg's leather-clad mercenaries, not the crowd. For Pournelle, the future will look a great deal like the past in that humanity will not outgrow war, even as it spreads out to settle new planets.

If Wells, London, and Asimov all accurately reflected the geopolitical ages in which they wrote, it is logical to assert that Pournelle and the rest of Baen's stable of military science fiction authors can offer clues to the nature of the post-Ideological era. Several characteristics can be discerned: the future will have a diversity of states, rather than unitary empires; it will include some form of market economics; and socially it will be hierarchical, rather than socialist egalitarian. These characteristics dovetail well with Agnew's three main tenets of Civilizational geopolitics: a balance of power (embodied in the Concert of Europe); a search for markets by the leading powers of the era; and a social order "defined by aristocratic and bourgeois élites."⁵⁵ Additional characteristics of the new era can be deduced from two examples of Baen Books' signature cover art, from two of their best-selling authors. Specifically, the collective gaze of the future will be inward-directed. The cover of John Ringo's *A Hymn Before Battle* depicts two soldiers on a jungle hunt for invading aliens; but the scene is planet-bound, and could be taking place on Earth. David Weber's *Mission of Honor*, part of the hugely popular Honor Harrington series, features a naval-style space battle on the front cover; but the viewer's gaze is directed downward toward the planet under attack, not outward toward the unexplored universe. Finally, Weber's work suggests that the future will be post-racial. The "Characters" appendix of *Mission of Honor* is dominated by names indicative of racial and ethnic mixing that has been underway for centuries.⁵⁶ This also aligns with the Civilizational Age, which Agnew characterizes as pre-dating the "high point" of the formalized, pseudo-scientific racism of the Naturalized Age.⁵⁷

While the current age of geopolitics has yet to be formally named by the academic community, if

current science fiction is an accurate indicator, it may eventually receive a moniker along the lines of “Neo-Civilizational” or “Civilization Mark II.”

Conclusion

We have therefore seen that science fiction, a chronically underrated and disrespected literary genre, can serve as a highly accurate and insightful prism with which to view and analyze the geopolitical age in which it is written. Science fiction exhibited a left-wing orientation during the first eighty years of its existence, roughly from 1890 to 1970. During this period, H. G. Wells and Jack London exemplified the evolutionary and racial aspects, respectively, of the Naturalized Age of geopolitics. Moving into geopolitics’ Ideological Age, Isaac Asimov’s *The Foundation Trilogy* reflected an ideology of salvation through central planning and elite, vanguard leadership by experts that was shared in varying degrees by both the Soviet Union and the United States. Finally, Jerry Pournelle helped define a new sub-genre, right-wing military science fiction, that points the way toward a new era of geopolitics that most closely resembles the Civilizational Age of the mid-Nineteenth Century. This new age will feel relatively “limited,” being comparatively conservative, inward-looking, and lacking in the grand, expansive visions of its immediate predecessors.

The new age will seem to have this limited, constrained feel as a direct result of its right-wing, post-Ideological orientation. With the end of the Cold War, a confident liberalism reigns supreme. But liberal democratic capitalism lacks the ambition and utopianism of its discredited competitors. As Jackson Lears recently noted, in reviewing David Runciman’s *The Confidence Trap*, “Marxist-Leninist societies had to deliver on their utopian promises and could not; *liberal democracy did not have to deliver anything*, but simply retain its promise as something that still made sense to believe in.” (emphasis added)⁵⁸ Put another way, the “Neo-Civilizational” Age

will lack the expansive visions of its predecessors, simply because the expectations embodied in its underlying assumptions are lower and its terms of debate are narrower.

How is current science fiction reacting to these conditions? The best way to answer this question is to give the last word to a contemporary author, Paul Di Filippo, in his 2014 short story, “I’ll Follow the Sun.” Time traveler Dan Wishcup jumps forward from 1964 to 2014, and is at first impressed with the advanced gadgetry of the Twenty-First Century. But he grows disgusted with what he sees as the ennui and limitations of contemporary society, eventually berating a roomful of young hipsters with the following outburst:

“Major changes. Ha! There hasn’t been a major change in the life of the average person in the past fifty years. Do you know when all the big changes happened? Back in the first half of the twentieth century [*sic*]. Flight, cars, antibiotics, fertilizers, radio, television, satellites – life was truly revolutionized. ... Everything since then has just been frosting on the cake ... [e]ndless recycling of ideas, no innovations. Why are the lines of a car from 2016 totally the same as one from the year 2000? That was never true when I grew up! ... our civilization is utterly lost. Lost in a maze of robot button-pushing, fear, zero ambitions, self-loathing, narcissism, bad manners, and hatred. A zero-sum game, a war of all against all.”

...

Immense peals of laughter resounded like the fall of some glass city. Someone said, “Epic rantfail!”

This was what passed for reasoned dialogue these days.⁵⁹

The current age of geopolitics will likely not be quite as bleak as Wishcup suggests. As with past epochs, it will include crises and high drama enough to provide ample inspiration for new generations of science fiction authors. But compared to the previous eras dominated by left-wing themes, the Neo-Civilizational Age will seem relatively limited in vision and even unimaginative. And it is hard to escape the conclusion that anyone with a memory of the Ideological Age, in approaching current science fiction, will not have a strong feeling that something very important is missing.

ENDNOTES

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

¹ This paper will confine itself to English-language works for two reasons: first, to limit the scope of the analysis, and second, because it can arguably represent the West as whole, in view of the fact that the genre's entire lifespan to date, and its most significant output, has been dominated by the English-speaking hegemonic nations of Great Britain and the United States.

² Agnew, *Re-Visioning World Politics*, 95, 105.

³ Ibid., 87.

⁴ Andre, Comment in response to Thomas F. Bertonneau, "World Without Men: The Forgotten Novel of Totalitarian Lesbocracy by Charles Eric Maine."

⁵ Marx, "On the Realm of Necessity and the Realm of Freedom," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 319-20.

⁶ Ibid., 320.

⁷ Agnew, *Re-Visioning World Politics*, 97.

⁸ Smith, *H. G. Wells, Desperately Mortal*, 4.

⁹ Ibid., 8-9, 89.

¹⁰ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 201, 549-707.

¹¹ Wells, *In the Days of the Comet*, book 1, chapter 3, section 4.

¹² Ibid., book 2.

¹³ Ibid., book 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., epilogue.

¹⁵ Rev. 21. 2, 23, 27; 22. 1-2. Lest it be thought at this point that the connection between early Christianity and science fiction skips over atheistic Marxism, it should be noted that Marx appreciated the power of using Christian imagery to emphasize a point. As Jesus said to the disciples:

Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops. (Luke, 12.3.)

So did Marx choose to close out *Capital, Volume I*, with an evocative line announcing a new revelation:

The only thing that interests us is the secret discovered in the new world by the Political Economy of the old world, and proclaimed on the housetops: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of self-earned private property; in other words, the expropriation of the labourer. (Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, part 8, chapter 33.)

¹⁶ Hedrick, *Solitary Comrade*, 3-29, 201.

¹⁷ Ibid., 38, 43, 165.

¹⁸ Agnew, *Re-Visioning World Politics*, 98.

¹⁹ London, *The Iron Heel*, chapter 1.

²⁰ Ibid., Foreword.

²¹ Ibid., chapter 1.

²² London, "A Curious Fragment," epilogue.

²³ London, "Goliath."

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Orwell, *In Front of Your Nose*, 29.

²⁶ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 72-74.

²⁷ London, "The Red One."

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 31-32.

³⁰ Ibid., 41.

³¹ Ibid., 525-27.

³² Agnew, *Re-Visioning World Politics*, 105.

³³ Asimov, *I. Asimov*, 36, 61, 334, 500.

³⁴ The trilogy is composed of the following titles: *Foundation* (1951), *Foundation and Empire* (1952), and *Second Foundation* (1953).

³⁵ Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 311.

³⁶ Asimov, *Foundation*, 45-46.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

³⁸ Booker, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War*, 33-34. See also Asimov, *Foundation and Empire*, 275-76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 266-67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 2.

⁴³ Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" in *The Lenin Anthology*, 49-59, 67-79.

⁴⁴ Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 126.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁶ Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jerry Pournelle's official Web site, "Chaos Manor," www.jerrypournelle.com/whatis.html (*Chicago*, 17.237)

⁴⁹ The core chapters of *The Mercenary*, introducing Falkenberg as a character and including the story of his defining deeds on Hadley, originally appeared as the short story/novella "The Mercenary" in *Analog* magazine in July 1972, and were first published in novelized form with additional chapters in 1977.

⁵⁰ Pournelle and Stirling, *The Prince*, Chronology.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, Prologue.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, part 2: *Mercenary*, chapter 11.

⁵⁵ Agnew, *Re-Visioning World Politics*, 87-88.

⁵⁶ Weber, *Mission of Honor*, 833-60.

⁵⁷ Agnew, *Re-Visioning World Politics*, 23.

⁵⁸ Lears, "Mistakes Get Made," in *The Nation*, 9 February 2015, 36.

⁵⁹ Di Filippo, "I'll Follow the Sun," in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, November/December 2014, 30.

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